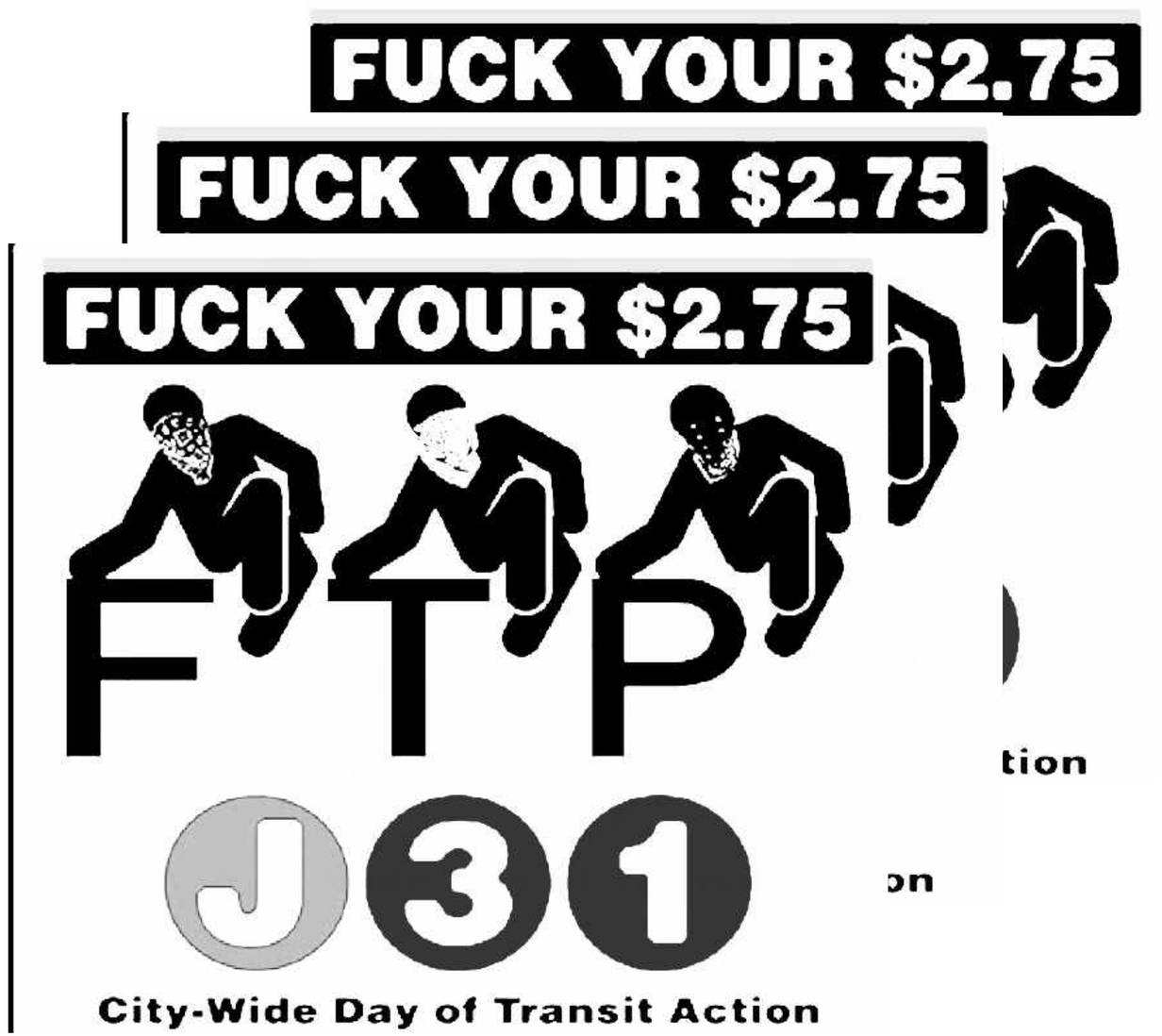


True Leap Press

The Art of Escalation

Becoming Ungovernable on a Day of City-Wide Transit Action

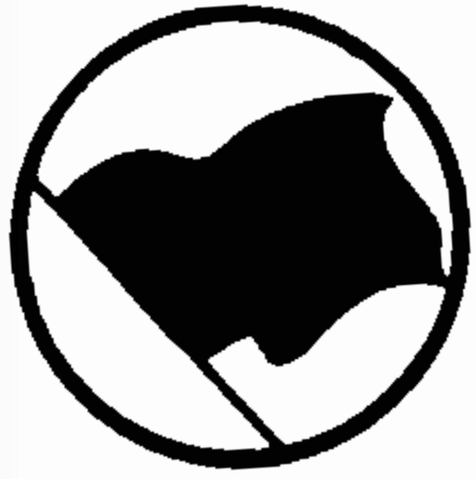
FULL STOP

#FTP #decolonizethisplace #evade

FUCK THE POLICE
FEED THE PEOPLE
FIGHT THE POWER
FEEL THE POWER
FUCK THE PIPELINES
FUCK THE PRISONS
FREE THE PRISONERS
FUCK THE PILGRIMS
FUCK THE POLITICIANS
FUCK THE PROFITS
FUCK THE PROPAGANDA
FUCK THE PRESIDENT
FOR THE PEOPLE
+ + +

from rappers and poets to designers and graffitists, painters, dancers, videographers, and more, transforming the imaginary of the city in a way that recalls Suzanne Cesaire's anti-colonial surrealism, which appeals to "…the domain of the strange, the marvelous and the fantastic, a domain scorned by people of certain inclinations." Cesaire wrote, "Thus, far from contradicting, diluting, or diverting our revolutionary attitude toward life, surrealism strengthens it. It nourishes an impatient strength within us, endlessly reinforcing the massive army of refusals." Those in the arts who have been intrigued, inspired, or inflamed by the crisis of art institutions in recent years now face a moment in which urban class war, "a massive army of refusals," is coming to a head without the buffering mediation of the museum. They are already implicated in this war by virtue of living, working, and traveling in the city; the question posed by our moment is: what will you be doing on J31?

fun fact:



Insurrectional anarchism emerges as a perspective within the class struggle. This perspective can be expressed in three key principles:
(i) Permanent conflictuality: the struggle should never turn into mediation, bargaining or compromise;
(ii) Autonomy and self-activity: the struggle should be carried out without representatives and 'specialists';
(iii) Organization as attack: the organization should be used as a tool in the attack against state and capital, and not treated as a goal in and of itself.
What this means, in its most essential and concrete way, is this: to seize and keep the initiative...

and block by block, in advance of the further crises that are on the horizon, not least of all the rising tides of fascism, on one hand, and climate breakdown on the other.

Though the focus of organizing has stepped away from art institutions for now, the J31 convergence builds movement power and relations that will inevitably come back to bear on the unresolved crises that continue to simmer at museums like the Whitney, the AMNH, and MoMA despite developments like the removal of Kanders. Beyond the art system, art and artists of all kinds are playing a crucial role as organizers,

This pamphlet was released as an article online the day of an action that took NYC by storm, provoking the imagination of militant abolitionists around the country onward. The collective behind it – Decolonize this Place – importantly oulines their concrete goals of "free transit, all cops off the subways, an end to the harassment of vendors, performers, and unhoused people, and full accessibility of those with varying abilities."

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Free for prisoners

Today, Friday, January 31, 2020 (J31), is set to be a day of "city-wide transit action" in New York City, convened by FTP. FTP is a political formation that is autonomous from elected officials, nonprofits, and NGOs. The acronym stands for "Fuck the Police," but also "Free the People," among many other things, as evident in a litany of iterations visible on posters seen around the city last week. Building on mobilizations late last year in downtown Brooklyn, Harlem, and the South Bronx, the actions of J31 will culminate in a convergence at the iconic clock in Grand Central Station at 5pm. A diversity of tactics will be used to broadcast the following demands,

Grand Central and Counter-Spectacle

What will it look like to bring these strands of organizing and art into the spectacular site of Grand Central Station? J31 is likely to be a high-visibility convergence, given the location's photogenic architectural profile and its historical significance in the elite branding of the city (replete with a so-called Transit Museum that is really just a gift-shop for MTA-branded souvenirs and a nostalgic model train set). Unlike the relatively protected space of a museum, however, Grand Central is also among the most militarized and surveilled sites in the city. It is a workplace for thousands of service workers, and a core piece of urban infrastructure around which the flows of labor in the city and the region revolve. It provides an ideal stage for a mass counter-spectacle, and also a very tangible site of economic noncompliance through fare evasion and potentially transit shutdowns.

Ungovernability is not a matter of disruption and chaos for its own sake. It is a strategic choice to open up a gap between the people and the state. This gap could dramatically tip the balance of power and open space for the achievement of transformative demands otherwise thought to be impossible. Becoming ungovernable names the moment when people cross a threshold of freedom, lose fear, and begin to embrace their collective potentials of both refusal and creation. It is a call and response across times and places, generations, and movements, that find one another and build power from below. It points to reclaiming the city, site by site

The FTP III Operations Manual has in recent weeks taken on a life of its own, with orientation sessions popping up on Instagram, and in one instance, copies of the manual being affixed to the site-specific installation orchestrated between the MTA and MoMA devoted to celebrating the role of "good design" in the history of the subway.

If "artwashing" typically involves the appeal to values of beauty and refinement by oligarchs attempting to sanitize their public profile, the related phenomenon of design-washing at work in the MoMA exhibition might be defined as the conceit that simplicity, legibility, and functionality in design in some way equal to access and quality in basic services. Nothing could be further from the truth in the case of the MTA. In recent days, we have also seen pages of the manual printed out at large scale and affixed to MTA structures, often combined with graffiti annotations specifying the location of the J31 convergence. The proliferation of politicized graffiti on trains and elsewhere in recent months is another sign of a deep escalation process at work, one that taps into the contested history of the subway itself, dating back to the earliest "broken windows" campaigns in the 1980s during the enforcement of austerity and the rise of gentrification after the 1975 fiscal crisis. We might read this resurgence of graffiti through the lens of a saying from the Palestinian struggle: "They own the media; we have the walls!"

as laid out in the FTP III Operations Manual that has been circulating online, in the streets, and on the trains for the past month: Free transit, all cops off the subways, an end to the harassment of vendors, performers, and unhoused people, and full accessibility for those with varying abilities. These demands have been further elaborated in a recent communiqué to transit workers, many of whom have engaged with FTP autonomously in recent months, but whose union has yet to publicly respond.

The self-described "crown jewel" of New York, Grand Central is both a site of spectacular self-promotion for capital, as well as a core infrastructural hub of the city and the broader region. Whatever disruptions occur there on J31 will amplify an emergent crisis of governability in the city, one with the potential to reinvent the very terms of power between the state and the people — especially the poor and working-class Indigenous, Black, and brown people that make up the majority of this city.

Our present moment of *becoming ungovernable* has been closely involved with the politics of art in every sense, giving rise to what we will call here the *arts of escalation*. This phrase describes a way of practicing art that is not only embedded within the work of grassroots organizing but that actively contributes to the acceleration and intensification of that organizing work as it approaches a direct challenge to state power and capital. The phrase also proposes that organizing in its deepest sense might be considered a kind of

art, insofar as it involves techniques and forms, images and ideas, dreams and desires, experiments and processes that build new relations and formations as we work together to unsettle the powers that be in a city structured from its inception by the violence of settler-colonialism and racial capitalism.

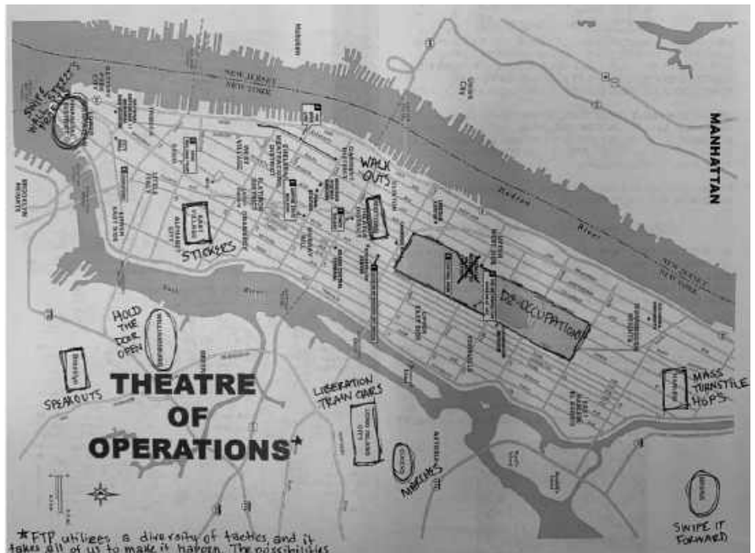
The arts of escalation are inseparable from — though not reducible to — the infrastructures and ecosystems of social media. Ideas, words, performances, and images of all kinds have proliferated in advance of J31 on platforms including Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and especially Instagram. This has created an ever-growing participatory feedback loop between networked digital media, artistic expression, and embodied direct action. Were there any doubt as to the reverberative power of such digital organizing work, it suffices to note that over the past month, numerous FTP postings are being removed or hidden per day by corporate moderators and algorithms at Instagram and Facebook. However powerful these platforms can be as organizing tools, it is imperative that we not forget that they are ultimately controlled by capital and thus cannot be counted on as substitutes for work on the ground. They are patrolled in ways that are racialized and reactionary, as when the phrase "Fuck the Police" is flagged as "hate speech," possibly in tandem with state security agencies and their supporters.

Art, artists, and aesthetics have played a crucial role in bringing us to this point of ungovernability, but not in ways that

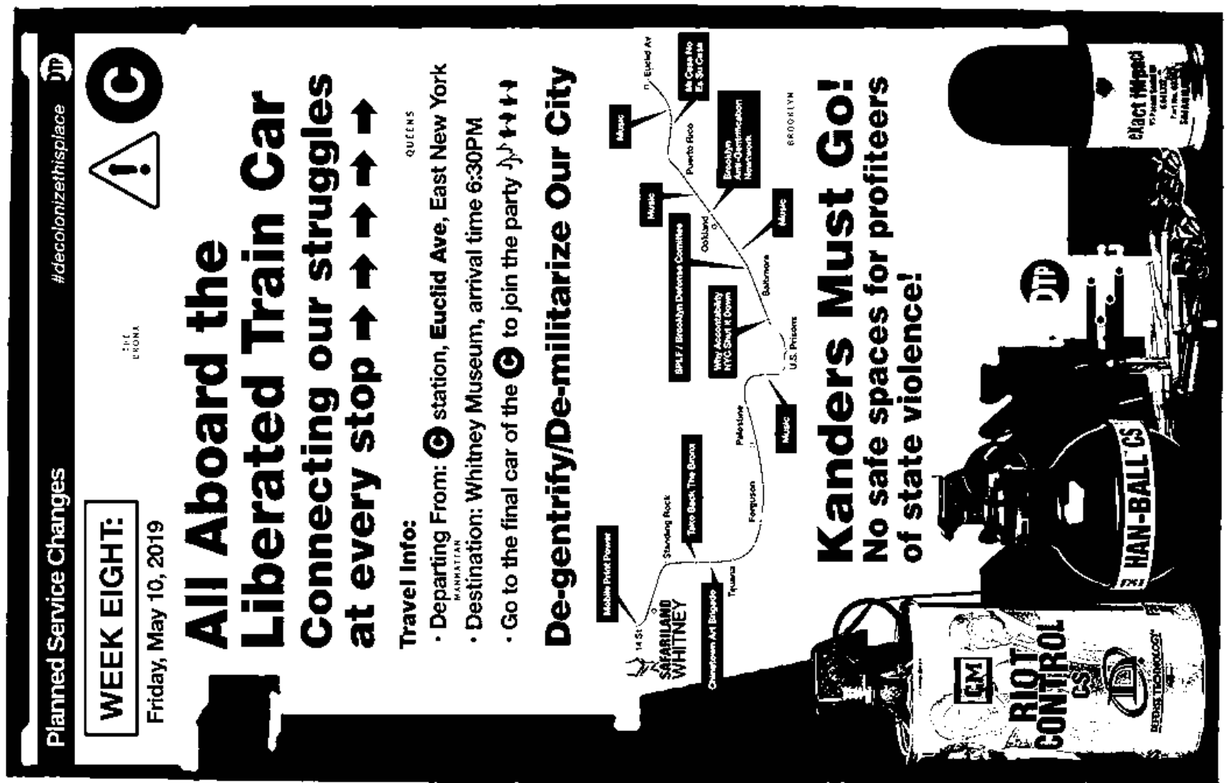
The middle spread of the document is a horizontally-oriented map of the city, titled "Theater of Operations." Here again, the Situationists are a relevant point of reference, treating the map as a kind of tactical for optimizing disruption and blockade on the one hand, and free movement on the other. However, taken on their own, the Situationists remain a Eurocentric avant-garde that sees capitalism as the exclusively defining dynamic of the city; the Operations Manual, by contrast, begins with a land acknowledgment that New York stands on occupied Lenape territory, insisting that capitalism is inseparable from the ongoing history of settler-colonialism. By extension, this also means that any struggle around freeing the transit infrastructure must also involve solidarity with calls for Indigenous land restitution and sovereignty as called for by the Red Deal in its vision of climate justice at urban, regional, and global scales.

anonymous "warriors from Brazil." Among the ideas noted there is the use of pipe-cutters to cut through the revolving arms of subway turnstiles, physically negating the very apparatus of fare-capture itself. Other graphic communiqués have emphasized the importance of collective preparation, security culture and mutual care in the midst of demonstrations, as well as techniques for documenting and instances of police harassment of unhoused people. Stickers, posters, and graffiti have also been used in myriad ways not only as counter-propaganda but also to directly disable MTA fare equipment such as the newly installed OMNY screens.

A grainy video-still of the aftermath of the November 22 turnstile cutting, taken from an anonymous Twitter account, is featured on the cover of the *FTP III Operations Manual*; available as both on online document and a pocket-sized hard-copy printed brochure that has been distributed by the thousands over the past few weeks, the Operations Manual contains essential materials concerning both the ethos of FTP as well as tools, tips, and tactics for J31 and beyond itself.



have been thus far legible to most of those operating within the official economies, institutions, and media outlets of the art system. This is despite the fact that over the past few years, the art system has undergone a deep crisis of legitimacy and matters of political activism are at the forefront of the field. The Guggenheim, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Brooklyn Museum, American Museum of Natural History, El Museo Del Barrio, the New Museum, and the Whitney Museum are among the institutions that have become sites of intense struggle concerning their complicity with violence, plunder, displacement, and dispossession, throwing into relief the embeddedness of these institutions in structures of settler-colonialism, white supremacy, and oligarchic rule that date to the very foundations of the city itself.



How does this crisis of the art system, exemplified by the removal of Warren Kanders from the Whitney last year, relate to what is happening in the streets right now? Seen through the lens of J31, the museum-related struggles of the past few years might be retrospectively seen as having activated cultural institutions as training grounds in the practice of freedom: as media amplifiers, organizing platforms, pedagogical zones, and places of popular artistic creativity that point beyond art itself as a specialized arena. In the process of subjecting institutions to transformative demands, these actions have also made clear the ways in which they are structurally tied to the power relations of the city at large. For example, in Week 8 of the action-series targeting the Whitney last spring, artists organizers took over a train car starting in East New York ultimately destined to the museum. That action used the subway as a mobile amplifier for grassroots movements fighting police violence, gentrification, and transit injustice, providing an urban frame to the struggle to remove Kanders — who, it should be remembered, counts the NYPD and Department of Corrections as among his clients.

J31 brings these recent dynamics to a head, with art as a force of imagination, organizing, and action directly at work in an escalating struggle that is at once beautiful in its radicality and uncompromising in its life-or-death stakes. FTP has involved not only acts of negation against the powers that be, but also cultivated spaces of care, mutual aid, and

Numerous graphic iterations of fare-evasion have circulated in social media since November, including a set of stickers that depict three masked jumpers hoisting themselves over a turnstile that spells out FTP. It is significant that in this graphic, also featured on J31 posters that appropriate the format of official MTA signage, the figures sport masks, speaking to the aesthetics of "masking up" for reasons of both security (avoiding recognition by police and media) and solidarity (it is common to see scarves emblazoned with the pattern of the Palestinian keffiyeh, for instance, while others wear bandanas in the style of Zapatistas, or create their own improvised designs).

Fare evasion is a deliberate form of refusal that places one directly in conflict with the state and Wall Street, whether one is "hopping" or using other techniques such as Swipe It Forward or simply holding the door open so others unable or not wanting to hop can pass (disabled people, pregnant people, people with strollers, vending equipment, or heavy loads). The diversity of bodily means through which fare evasion can take place also speaks to a core demand of the mobilizations: full accessibility for riders of varying abilities.

Other tactics have surfaced in reality and online in recent months that involve a higher degree of risk than fare evasion per se, undertaking autonomous actions in smaller groups. Forms and techniques from Chile, Ecuador, and elsewhere in the global south have been widely circulating, including in an inventory of ideas graphically assembled by

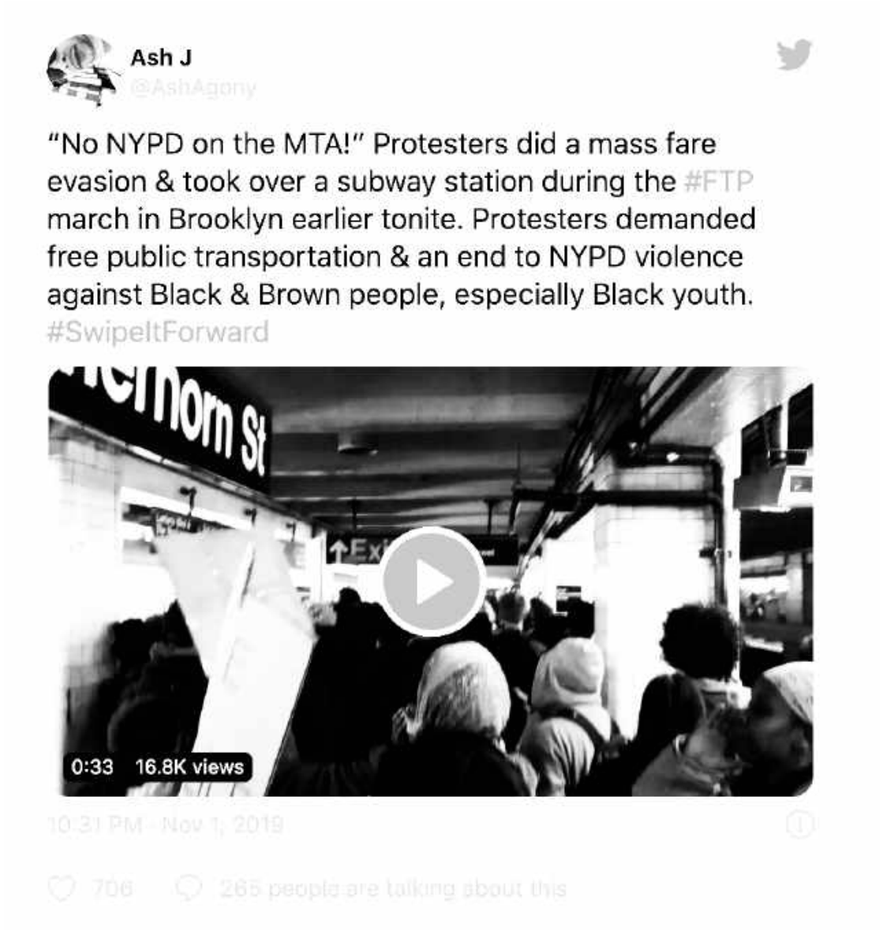
occurred in Brooklyn on the evening of November 1, when hundreds of people jumped the turnstiles at Schermerhorn stop, overwhelming an ill-prepared NYPD and garnering widespread media attention (including by the comedians Desus and Mero, who humorously highlighted "protestors' new turnstile workout" documented in videos of the Brooklyn action).

Enacting the demand for free transit and unhindered mobility, fare evasion has, since November, become an iterative chain of images and actions that have transformed the subway itself as a kind of artistic medium — both as a physical site of artistic interventions and one invoked in image-forms of all kinds in social media. Fare evasion as a political tactic has been inspired both the day to day life evoked by the "Hop It" video, but also the use of the tactic in Chile during the anti-austerity rebellion there. The mascot of fare jumping in Chile has been Matapacos ("cop killer") a dog who is omnipresent in Chilean actions and who is now featured in the imagery of the group Ride Free NYC jumping over a turnstile and accompanied by the hashtag #evade.

community self-defense, especially in and around the transit system.

The actions of J31 build on the FTP mobilizations last November. The latter were sparked and subsequently fueled by a series of videos documenting the brutalization and harassment by police of Black and brown people in the subway, including the pulling of guns on a Black teen who had jumped a turnstile, and the brutal arrest of vendors, performers, and unhoused people. This uptick in police violence in the subway has been related to the "broken windows" policing campaign deployed by the MTA against fare-jumping and other "quality of life" crimes. These policies are related in turn to the MTA's vote to add an *additional* 500 police to the subways this year to the tune of $250 million as it undertakes an array of high-tech financial/dataveillance upgrades and corporate partnerships, exemplified by OMNY technology. This combination of criminalizing the poor and gentrifying the trains brings into relief the fact that the MTA is not, in any meaningful way, a public agency accountable to the people who use it for their day-to-day need for mobility. The MTA is bonded to Wall Street creditors and controlled by Cuomo and an unaccountable board of directors; it is geared toward servicing the most wealthy interests in the city even as it continues to tax, harass, and punish Black and brown New Yorkers. The governance and policing of the MTA embody in systematic form the powers that own and control the city. And yet, out of necessity and dignity, working-class people regularly enact an everyday "politics of

endurance" through their relationships with this vital piece of collective infrastructure, whether through fare-evasion, vending, performing, or sleeping, among other measures of survival.



Two large FTP actions occurred last November. The first targeted the corporatized center of downtown Brooklyn, where one of the infamous police attacks had

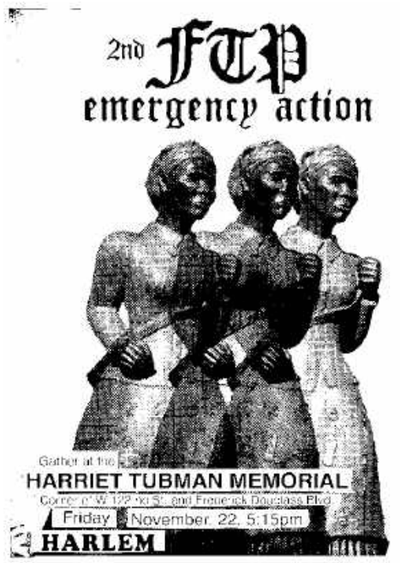
petty "crime" was somehow to blame for the overall fiscal crisis of the MTA. As communicated by the hip-hop artist Lowkey Mar in his music video "Hop It" (released last spring, months before FTP itself was consolidated), fare-jumping is a day to day necessity for many New Yorkers, especially poor people of color.

The video takes pleasure in highlighting various styles and techniques of evasion, and also makes the tactic a point of pride and dignity, framing fare-jumping as an assertion of the right to free mobility and a practice of mutual aid between New Yorkers. Resonating with the long-standing Swipe It Forward project, the "Hop It" video proposes the question of what it means for these day to day acts of refusal and kindness to become a collective movement explicitly antagonistic to the MTA and the police. This is indeed what

The Aesthetics and Politics of Fare Evasion: Subway as Medium

In both of November's FTP mobilizations, a core form of action was mass fare evasion. It is important to recall that last year's ramping up of policing in the subway was explicitly tied to a campaign against what the MTA has attempted to brand as the scourge of fare jumping as if this everyday

been documented. That action witnessed hundreds of marchers descending into the subways to enact mass fare evasions.



Two weeks later, as police attacks on the subway continued to escalate, an FTP march took place in Harlem, firmly framed as part of the Black radical tradition of that rapidly gentrifying zone. This was signaled by beginning the action at the Harriet Tubman monument by Allison Saar, which was brought to life by the estimated thousand people who gathered around it to prepare for the march. Faced with the prospect of further evasions, the NYPD was forced to entirely shut down the 125th subway stop for hours. Fifty-eight people were arrested that evening, which also saw the deployment of creative tactics such as the chopping off of subway turnstiles and the deployment of anti-surveillance umbrellas and lasers (the latter tactics having been inspired by and borrowed from uprisings in Chile, Haiti, Ecuador, and Puerto Rico).

The FTP mobilizations (including those of J31) have been grounded in the work of long-term Black and brown-led grassroots organizing work like Swipe It Forward, Why

Accountability, Cop Watch NYC, Take Back the Bronx, NYC Shut it Down, and Comité Boricua En La Diáspora, which channel multiple generations of abolitionist work into the present. The actions have also involved the work of Decolonize This Place (DTP), a group founded in 2016 but best known over the past year for having led (in collaboration with the aforementioned organizations as well as groups including Indigenous Kinship Collective) the campaign to remove Kanders from the board of the Whitney.

From the Museum to the City: A Strategic Pivot

Decolonize This Place featured prominently in "best of the year" lists released last December by art publications. Jerry Saltz of *New York* magazine and Holland Cotter of *New York Times* both included the DTP actions at the Whitney in their "top rankings" while *Art Review* ranked DTP as #19 on its "Power 100" list of 2019's "most influential people in the contemporary artworld." Symptomatically, all such accolades focused entirely on the Whitney crisis, framing the work of DTP as primarily a kind of art world reform watchdog concerned with the morality of museum donors and governance structures. However, since its inception as a mobilization against settler-colonialism and gentrification at the Brooklyn Museum in 2016, DTP has always emphasized that it does not treat the art world as an end in of itself apart from the broader antagonisms of the city. This was the explicit framework for the "Beyond Kanders" Town Hall Trailed by upwards of one hundred police, the counter-tour first stopped at Seneca Village, an autonomous Black village razed by Frederick Law Olmsted to make way for Central Park in 1857 (a process that involved the first use of eminent domain by the city). The group then proceeded to the Great Lawn, where a massive circle was arranged comprised of dozens of banners used in past actions throughout the city. Set off in front of the skyline of ultra-luxury skyscrapers, the banner-circle created a kind of ritual amphitheater of solidarity for the hundreds of assembled people; the assembly addressed the deep histories of settler-colonial land theft on which the city stands as well as contemporary processes of displacement facilitated by the city. The circle-assembly at the Great Lawn also served to announce a subsequent action later that month at the Department of City Planning targeting the infamously unaccountable Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) zoning process.

Before, during, and after the Kanders crisis, the relationships facilitated by DTP over several years between organizers, workers, artists, students, scholars, and journalists created an interpersonal and social media milieu in which multiple lines of collective intellect, artistry, and power could come together in response to a real-time crisis. It was this work of organizing that enabled a strategic pivot from the museum to the city, creating the conditions of possibility for FTP to activate in the Fall of 2019.

A few weeks later, abolitionism provided the frame for the fourth anti-Columbus Day (Indigenous People's Day) counter-tour of the American Museum of Natural History. Departing from the Roosevelt monument (which features a Black man and a Native man flanking an equestrian Roosevelt) a thousand people defied the expectations of the museum and police alike by marching up Central Park West and into the park itself. The lead banners of the march set the frame of the action, namely the articulation of decolonization and abolition: "No New Jails on Stolen Land"; "Abolition Now: No Borders, No Landlords, No Cops, No Prisons"; and "Under the Museum/University/City=The Land." The latter unsettled the famous Situationist slogan from May '68 "Under the Cobblestones, the Beach." Whereas the latter evokes an unspecified energy of freedom welling up from under the reified crust of the city, this banner was unabashedly decolonial in its orientation, with "Land" marking the horizon of struggle for oppressed Indigenous, Black, and immigrant people of color. "We were never meant to know each other," reads the flyer, "land is the basis of the freedom of our people."

Assembly hosted by DTP in early September of last year. Subtitled "Decolonizing The Museum, Decolonizing The City," the announcement for the event positioned the Whitney and other museums within the broader cartography of the city and included an extensive list of cosponsors — many of whom now form the nucleus of FTP.

Among the flashpoints of the post-Kanders Town Hall was the figure of Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation. The day after the resignation of Kanders, Walker had published a *New York Times* op-ed supporting the removal of Kanders (he is widely rumored to have played a behind-the-scenes role) and claiming it as a sign of the need for museums to diversify their boards. Walker then embarked on a tightly-knit media campaign aiming to control the post-Kanders narrative, positioning himself as a kind of moderate buffer between the elites of the museum and philanthropy world and those of protesters, the latter of whom, he worried, appeared ready to "destroy the system, want to destroy museums." His article "In Defense of Nuance" lamented the specter of "extremism" and "populist anger" coming from protesters, and sought to emphasize to his elite readership that the call to transform museums should not involve "the demonization of rich people."

Walker's remarks were implicitly addressed to Decolonize This Place and its collaborators in the No New Jails coalition, who pointed out that not only was Walker was distorting the stakes of the Kanders victory by calling for "diversity" rather

than "decolonization" (the framework signed on to by hundreds of artists and scholars who legitimized the campaign), but that the Ford Foundation had a long history of attempting to co-opt radical struggles under the rubric of "social justice" while reassuring the ruling class of its comfort and control of the city. In case there was any doubt, the life-and-death ramifications of Walker's elite reformism became clear when it was revealed that he had been a member of Bill de Blasio's Criminal Justice task force, which had recommended the construction of "more humane" jails to replace Riker's Island. As the furor around Walker escalated, legendary abolitionist Angela Davis herself called for a protest against the Ford Foundation, which was in turn picked up by Take Back the Bronx, Now New Jails, DTP, and hundreds of Ford Fellows themselves.

On the day of the protest, Ford shut down its atrium, set up security barriers in front of the entrance, and called in an entire unit of NYPD brandishing ziptie-handcuffs to guard the building from demonstrators, who assembled with signs reading "If They Build it, They Will Fill It"; "Abolition Now!"; and "Fuck Your Nuance!" Coming just a month after the resignation of Kanders, the Ford protest was remarkable in that it took aim not at a widely despised public enemy like Kanders, but rather at a celebrated "good guy" of the progressive philanthropy world (Walker) demanding that he and his organization take a side side between what Dylan Rodriguez called "carceral world-making" and the project of abolition.